

C.B. Macpherson and Philosophy, “Crypto” or Otherwise: A Response to Frank Cunningham

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I have a high regard for Frank Cunningham and his work, on socialism, on democratic theory—and on C.B. Macpherson. To take one example, his new introductions to the recent reissues of Macpherson’s books from Oxford University Press, including *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* and *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*, are excellent. Lucid and informative, they highlight the value Macpherson’s ideas hold for contemporary political thought. So I am grateful that he has offered so fulsome a critical response to my book—even though he finds my approach, based on the idea that there is a suppressed philosophical dimension in Macpherson’s work, though (dubiously) audacious, to be of limited accuracy or usefulness—indeed ultimately misguided. It results, he claims, in an analysis that “detracts from Macpherson’s political-theoretical and political strengths.”

However, persist in my misguided ways I must. And perhaps ironically, this is because of what I believe Cunningham and I share in our respective appraisals of Macpherson’s work. Our area of agreement is actually quite broad. Cunningham notes that, in the wake of his keystone works, *Possessive Individualism* and *Democratic Theory*, in which he elaborated the competing possessive individualist and developmental assumptions at the heart of liberal-democratic theory and practice, Macpherson pursued the implications of his analysis for a wide range of issues and concerns, including liberty, property, democracy and human rights. He then suggests that I “would not disagree with something like this description of Macpherson’s project.” He is certainly right about this. However, he then goes on to claim that I think this project “is insufficient unless it is shown how it is philosophically founded,” that I argue “not that Macpherson’s conclusions are philosophical but that they require philosophical support.”

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In fact, my view is quite the opposite: I think that Macpherson's ideas had and have a philosophically important richness and depth and for this reason should have been, and should be now, taken more seriously by critics and commentators—who, themselves, have for the most part been fellow political theorists and philosophers. Three decades ago, in the pages of this journal, Don Carmichael claimed that Macpherson was a master magician who “found” possessive individualism in Hobbes because he had by conceptual slight-of-hand put it there himself (Carmichael, 1983; see also Macpherson, 1983); I trust Cunningham would dispute this characterization, as indeed I would as well. But I take it to be a philosophically significant claim even if it does not take the form of a self-consciously systematic rebuttal of Macpherson's ideas on the basis of an articulated conception of how to read a political theory. Although broadly sympathetic to Macpherson's work, Carmichael reinforced the longstanding view of conventional liberals and conservatives that Macpherson was a Marxist ideologue who at the extreme twisted both the ideas of sixteenth-century political thinkers and historical facts to fit his preconceived and politically loaded notions. This is a line of argument that both Cunningham and I would vigorously dispute. So, while not denying Macpherson's “political agenda” or “pragmatic” approach—which Cunningham believes would not be enhanced by, and indeed would be disadvantaged by, reading Macpherson philosophically—I think exploring what I have called Macpherson's suppressed philosophical dimension can help show how his critique of possessive individualism and capitalism can plausibly be seen not only as entailed by but also required by the commitments of liberalism itself. And this would apply especially to the ideas of core liberal theorists like Locke and Mill, who developed those ideas in the context of an emerging and emergent capitalism.

The starting point of my analysis, and a core element throughout, is the claim that possessive individualism should not be understood as, or only as, a descriptive concept applied to the stated assumptions of political theorists. Rather, it is more fruitfully seen as a mediation, an articulation. It is an achievement or a result that is the product on the part of Macpherson of a reading of the tensions in liberal theory that can only be grasped from the vantage point of what we now know of the historically developing liberal, later liberal democratic, capitalist society and the social relations, conflicts and possibilities it has come to harbour and express. It is an attempt to see the present as history, and the continuing impact history has on the present. Put otherwise, it is an interpretation of what happened when the concepts, values and aims of Hobbes, Locke and other key thinkers in the tradition of classical and modern liberalism—and of the social forces that expressed and carried them—were realized across the board. And the developmental alternative, whereby individuals are seen not as, or at least not only as, infinite consumers and appropriators but rather as

doers and exerters of their distinctively human capacities, is another articulation rooted in the response of theorists to the apparent consequences and limitations that emerged from the realization of possessive market values and imperatives. I attempt to develop this reading of possessive individualism throughout the body of Macpherson's work on the basis that *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* exhibits a structure comparable to volume 1 of Marx's *Capital*. In other words, as Marx sought to develop a critique of political economy, so Macpherson attempted to work out a critique of political theory. It is a political theory of the triumph of the commodity form. This is a key reason why I link Macpherson's project to that of the Frankfurt School.

I acknowledge that this is not a common reading of Macpherson or the analysis of *Possessive Individualism*; Cunningham calls it "strained." I leave it to the readers of my book to judge for themselves the success or otherwise of my approach. I would only note that interpreting Macpherson in this manner suggests a way of countering the dismissive and unfair criticism that he saw Hobbes and Locke simply as bourgeois ideologues out to defend the interests of the dominant or soon to be dominant classes in the emerging capitalist society. By contrast, as I read him, Macpherson by and large has considerable respect for Hobbes and Locke—especially Hobbes—as serious thinkers who needed to be engaged as such, thinkers who told the truth about society as they saw it and to a considerable extent succeeded. (Certain later liberal thinkers, John Stuart Mill excepted, were perhaps another story, although Macpherson took them seriously as well, as theorists who reflected the changing character of bourgeois society and its legitimating values and the challenges this posed for political thinking.)

The idea of a suppressed philosophical dimension—and I nowhere claim that Macpherson "suppressed" his philosophical views, much less that I hold to a "suppression" thesis, as Cunningham asserts at different points—is my way of pursuing the implications of this reading of possessive individualism and consequently Macpherson's key concepts and concerns and how they are connected. Aside from the two forms of individualism, these would also include the net transfer of powers, a core notion that Macpherson significantly modified over the years and was a connecting link between *Possessive Individualism* and *Democratic Theory*, as well as his much underappreciated critique of social science; to both of these I devote considerable attention. My intention, again, was to capture more fully the "richness and meaning" that I believe are already present in Macpherson's work and not to claim that "a theory must be philosophically understood to be rich and meaningful." (And is it the case that "perception of richness and meaning is a subjective matter?" Do not such judgments involve social and cultural standards and thus possess objective if debatable content?) Nor is it intended to make

the case that a “philosophical founding” is required to make a political theory acceptable, or that in exploring the possibility or necessity of developmental supplanting possessive individualism one must attempt to show that “if the changes in question can or do take place this is due to something about the structure of human consciousness or the like” (I am not certain what is meant here). It is an attempt to broaden our appreciation of what Macpherson had already done, not to expose what he had failed to do. This is an appreciation not fully captured by Cunningham’s claim that Macpherson had stuck to “factually based political theory” and so had a better chance of making a political impact.

I wonder if it is indeed possible to offer a factually based political theory, at least in what I take to be Cunningham’s sense of the term. Facts need to be interpreted and thus have themselves theoretical or philosophical dimensions. But this in turn raises the key question posed by Cunningham and points to a critical difference between us: how is philosophy to be understood? I agree with Cunningham that Macpherson was not a philosopher in the generally accepted sense of the term. He was, as Cunningham points out, uninterested in philosophical foundations, by which is meant, if I understand him correctly, the use of formal syllogistic argumentation to systematically develop a conceptual framework at some level of abstraction from which, or out of which, concrete judgments about social and political phenomena might be generated. Cunningham’s point is that I try to slot Macpherson into an inappropriate frame of reference, one he neither sought nor adds anything to an understanding of his key ideas.

In making his case Cunningham seems to assume a specific understanding of philosophy as essentially a self-contained activity of conceptual and logical analysis designed to establish the truth of propositions and utilizing a distinctive language removed from immediate social and historical experience. As Cunningham sees it, that Macpherson develops his ideas without resort to such an intellectual exercise, that he sticks to the “facts” in formulating his political theory, is a great strength of his work. Indeed he distinguishes Macpherson’s political theory (and presumably that of others who likewise abjure foundational philosophical reasoning) from philosophy proper. When applied to Macpherson, who is noted for his lucid prose, this distinction pays off in the form of a much more accessible account of important political phenomena than more avowedly “philosophical” treatments would or could provide. It is evident to Cunningham, himself a philosopher, that Macpherson’s work is all the more valuable for *not* being philosophy.

However, in my view this essentially analytic approach to philosophy is not the only one. Philosophy has always claimed to be about how humans ought to live, about what is good for them. It is thus, in principle, open to all. Both for this reason and as a consequence, it can take the form of social-

historical reflection immersed in, not apart from, social-historical content, as it did for the Frankfurt School, with which I attempt to associate Macpherson's work (although contrary to Cunningham I do not claim that he self-identified as a critical theorist). It is about the human situation at a specific historical juncture, one that presents both threats and possibilities. Philosophy so understood involves concepts whose meanings are not permanently fixed but which nonetheless possess a unity—a unity that in the words of Max Horkheimer "results less from the invariability of their elements than from the historical development of the circumstances under which their realization is necessary" (1995: 37). I understand Macpherson's key ideas, and in particular his ontological assumptions, as implicitly expressing this historically situated reasoning. It does not stand apart from everyday life nor is exclusively restricted to a favoured few, which seems to be a concern for Cunningham. I do not believe, any more than Cunningham does, that Macpherson needed to undertake the sort of systematic abstract conceptual reasoning that is commonly identified as the hallmark of mainstream philosophy.

Let me suggest another way, then, to look at the relation of Macpherson's work to that of the Frankfurt School. The connection between Macpherson and critical theory was not a conscious sharing of a paradigm. But it was also not simply a matter of affinities or parallels, either, although I do refer to these. It was, more significantly, a common conceptual and historical horizon framed by the evolving contradictions and tensions of capitalism—and also, just as importantly, the crisis of classical or orthodox Marxism. Marx was a cornerstone for the reflections of both. But it was a Marx who had to be rethought in the wake of historical circumstances. Reconsidering Marx entailed a return to Marxism's humanistic roots and a move away from its scientific incarnation in actually existing socialism and communism. It required taking a step back from the immediate world of politics and society in order to reflect on the meaning of the current challenges. It meant, in other words, engaging in theory—and, yes, philosophy. As I argue in the book *Macpherson's Consideration and Reconsideration of Liberalism and Democracy* addresses what has been seen as a deficiency in the original Frankfurt School perspective—namely, its failure to deal adequately with both liberalism and democracy—and has considerable value for more recent critical theory as well. It is worth noting that from time to time Macpherson's work has provoked the interest of contemporary critical theorists in the tradition of the Frankfurt School. And this has included Jürgen Habermas, widely seen as the key figure of second and subsequent generation critical theorists.

I want to conclude by once again noting that in spite of our evident differences the area of agreement that Cunningham and I share is considerable. He finds value in my treatment of Marxism and my account of Macpherson's analysis of democracy. And he sees virtue in what he calls

the “similarities” I identify between Macpherson and Frankfurt philosophers, although again I would demur from any claim they held a “fully shared philosophical theory.” We both agree that Macpherson’s ideas are valuable for a progressive politics today, that he “was not alone or outdated in his pursuits.” And while I have obviously taken issue with his criticisms, I am grateful for the opportunity he has provided me to further elaborate and clarify my arguments.

There are multiple voices in any conversation about political thought, and about C.B. Macpherson. Mine is one. That of Frank Cunningham is another. I anticipate we will hear more of his in due course. When we do, we will all be the fortunate beneficiaries.

References

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